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A reading of Joseph Conrad's *The Tale*

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ABSTRACT

The Tale is a short story by Joseph Conrad. Typical of a Conrad story it is set at sea. The sea is symbolic of the unconscious and this story may be read as a story of the unconscious. On the outside, it seems simple; a man tells a woman a tale of the commanding officer of a patrol ship who gives false directions to another ship and sends it to its doom. In between the lines of the seemingly simple plot, however, can be read another tale; one which speaks of a human sea deeper than the sea of water; deeper, darker, and infinitely more mysterious. Man has navigated the sea of water but the unfathomed sea of his own being remains, for the most part, undiscovered. This is a sea different from the sea of this world and Conrad sets sail on it by telling a tale from another world. Sailing with Conrad, the reader can look out on the infinite vastness and try to form a picture of the infinite depth of a sea which is not visible to the human eye.

***Keywords*:** Character; self-awareness; self-delusion

1. THE PSYCHIC UNFOLDING

The story begins with a man and a woman whose relation the reader does not know. They are in a room and evidently in close intimacy. The woman asks the man to tell a story of another world. He pretendedly makes up a story but from his final confession we understand he is talking of a personal experience. Through the short interjections of the woman we gradually get a vague impression of the man's character. The fact that she wants a story from another world is provocative: what's wrong with the world in which she lives? Why does she want to take refuge -- even temporary make-belief refuge -- to another world? Is she herself dissatisfied with this world or does she want to give the man a chance to say -- in the guise of a story stripped of any relation to present reality -- whatever may be on his mind? Or does she want to probe his inner feelings in order to confirm or refute any doubts she may have nurtured as to the status of their relationship? A relationship which is undetermined and further blurred with the unequivocal interruptions of the woman as the man begins to voice his story, thus adding to the already shadowy setting with which the reader is confronted.

“She interrupted stirring a little, ‘Oh yes. Sincerity -- frankness -- passion -- three words of your gospel. Don't I know them!’ ”

It seems she is not unfamiliar with his "gospel" and her scorn seems unmistakable. Or does it? Nothing is very certain. In any case these sarcastic interruptions apparently do not have any effect on the man; he continues, undeterred.

His story is set in another world in which there is a war at sea in the manner of our own world. It circles around a commanding officer of a patrol ship who has the duty of looking out for enemy craft. For this commander, the daytime is the time for hiding inner truths, showing outer pretensions. The night however, is the commander' s safe haven, the time for being himself, letting free his real self. Paradoxically in the light of day he cannot see reality; in the dark of night all is clear. One misty, nasty day the commander's ship spies an object and on passing it from a close distance the crew surmise that it must be the sign of help to enemy submarines by a neutral party. Later they encounter a thick fog and have to stop the ship, only moving cautiously with temporary clearances of sight. In one such rare instance another ship is sighted at anchor in the cove where they had themselves finally dropped anchor.

The stranger ship had not -- despite the closeness of the patrol ship -- rang her bell, as if it had not wanted to be spied. When the second in command acknowledges this unclear circumstance, the commanding officer replies with a thoughtful "Aye" which comes to our mind later as we go over the whole story in retrospect. Although he does not know it himself it is most probably here with this utterance that the devilish seed which was to give flower to the fiery enmity later on, was planted. A boat is ordered to go and investigate and comes back revealing that the ship is a neutral ship -- supposedly on neither side of the warring parties -- which has encountered technical problems. At this point there is a reversal. The second in command who had initially suspected something was wrong with the neutral ship not having rang her bell has second thoughts while The commanding officer took his second aside, " 'By Jove!' he said, 'you were right! They were holding their breaths as we passed them. They were.' "

The second-in-command expresses doubt as to the validity of such a suspicion, but the commanding officer is propelled by an inner force - although one which, apparently, he can neither comprehend nor control. He decides to go on board the other ship himself even though his second advises "I'm afraid you couldn't even make a case for reasonable suspicion, sir;" but it is exactly here at this point that the second, being innocent of any blind inner passion, is also ignorant of it. The commanding officer is not seeking after reason; he is now as far as one can be from it. "He had made up his mind. Curiosity is the great motive power of hatred and love. What did he expect to find? He could not have told anyone -- not even himself."

Nothing. That is what he expected to find. That is what he knew he would find; at least nothing reasonable. But he had made up his mind anyway. *He* had made up his mind? Which he? The "he" which snapped orders promptly in daylight or the "he" who secretly dreaded how the glare of daytime light threatened to expose hidden truths? The "he" who longed for the safety of darkness where he could take off his pretentious mask and be free as his real self? The grey border where the conscious white of calculating reason blurs into the unconscious black of unpredictable caprice is where man does not know where he stands, does not know if he has made up his mind or his mind has been made up for him. We do not expect our commander to be able to tell "even himself" what he wants to find, he does not know which "himself" has "made up his mind".

Going abroad the stranger craft he is welcomed by a handsome Northman. This Northman has no name, no character; he is just Northman. The hero of the story is so engulfed in his own inner world that he needs no names; all he needs is another being. Any

other whom he can consider as enemy, at whom his scorn can lash out would suffice. This Northman happens to cross his way.

He boards the other' s ship, listens to his account of what had befallen him, weighs his claims against logic while "(a)ll the time the Northman is speaking….(he is) aware of an inward voice, a grave murmur in the depths of his very own self, telling another tale , as if on purpose to keep alive in him his indignation and his anger". The Northman sees a polished commanding officer, the epitome of logic-bound authority listening to his tale; what he does not see is the dark abyss behind this shiny exterior where his tale is lost and a dark, distorted shadow of it is echoed back. Somewhere deep down in that abyss a decision has been made, it merely needs time to surface. Meanwhile the officer must "keep alive in him his indignation and his anger" until the time when he will see himself as the agent of the as yet undetermined decision.

During a series of give-and-takes between the two men, the commanding officer sees other reasons to be suspicious of the Northman; reasons which probably only he himself could have accepted. Maybe this was why he had come alone; deep down he knew what he would infer would not appeal to, say, his second in command. But now being alone, he can ask himself whether the actions of the Northman could be "anything else but a guilty conscience?"

There is a pang of conscience when, once, suddenly "(h)e felt alarmed at catching himself thinking as if his vaguest suspicions were turning into a certitude. For indeed, there was no shadow of reason for his interferences". But, as a sweet scent lingers not long enough to fulfill the palate, so too a just sound is lost before ringing its full harmony. And since our commanding officer is smugly self-satisfied with his ethics, being "one of those men who are made morally and almost physically uncomfortable by the mere thought of having to beat down a lie" he questions himself only rarely; he is more concerned with judging others, or rather, projecting what he desires to see on others' attitudes. In his appearance though, he shows nothing. In talking with the Northman he declares "No I have no suspicions" while in "talking" with himself he feels "with astonishing conviction faced by an enormous lie, solid like a wall with no way around to get at the truth, whose ugly murderous face he seemed to see peeping over at him with a cynical grin."

Finally, the story reaches its culmination: the commanding officer orders the Northman to go.

" 'What! In this fog? the latter cried out huskily.' "

"Yes you will have to go in this fog."

"I don't know where I am, I really don't."

The Northman's eyes show a "profound amazement" as he faces the other. As for the commanding officer he is possessed with a "sort of fury" and as he speaks he does so with "composure, but his heart (is) beating with anger and dread." The commanding officer gives the Northman directions which lead him to a deadly ledge of rock. He, his ship his crew are drowned. The man, the narrator of the make-believe story now admits with half regret "Yes I gave that course to him."

The woman embraces him and expresses her sympathy with him since "She knew his passion for truth, his horror of deceit, his humanity." Disengaging himself from her embrace he leaves. The man's sudden leave carries with it an air of gloom, doubt, regret or even self-denied shame. Maybe in the sad sound of his retreating footsteps, Conrad hears the voice of Aristotle's authoritative voice asserting that the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity not a quality and that character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions -- what we do -- that we are happy or the reverse. Despite our hero's "passion for the truth, his horror of deceit,(and) his humanity" it is in that instant of action, those few seconds in which he gives

false directions that his whole being manifests its true nature. When his tongue moves as the agent of a power beyond the reach of his logic, his human worth is determined. The final result of the struggle of his inward forces is the action imposed by that which is the most powerful, that which embodies the essence of his lifelong yield -- and maybe that of his forefathers. The roads taken on all the diverging ways of his life led to that culminating action which determined whether he was to be “happy or the reverse”.

2. CONCLUSION

The woman is left, a shadow among shadows as the retreating figure of the man blends into more distant shadows, maybe hearing the echoes of her own conviction of “his passion for truth, his horror of deceit, his humanity” in the retreating footsteps.

Conrad leaves the tale with the dying away of the sound of the footsteps at the disposal of the reader. It is up to the reader to decide whether this woman really believes in the man's integrity, or whether she takes an ironic perspective, or whether she herself is driven by the very same forces that drove the man to give false directions. Maybe since at times she has intense passionate feelings for this man, from somewhere deep down in her being the decision to accept his integrity has been made, for, a logical decision to its contrary would mean an acceptance of his falseness towards herself.

Conrad's tale started in semidarkness, in obscurity, without names, without any knowledge of relations and ended in indefiniteness. In between the two obscure zones was embedded another tale. A tale set at sea, the vast, timeless, shapeless sea itself obscured by thick fog through which eyes could not discern their own feet. And indeed this is the very manifestation of the unconscious, where tales are made up within the tale of man’s life; it has no certain beginning, no certain end, and in between lies formless, shapeless infinite obscurity.

Reference

[1] Conrad Joseph, “The Tale.” *Short Stories for Discussion.* Albert K Ridout, Jesse Styuart, Eds. Charles Scribner’s sons, New York, 1965,

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